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The emergence of PR consultants as part of the Finnish political communication elite

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the idea of an emerging political communication elite in the context of the Finnish polity. The specific focus is on PR consultants' role as new, evolving actors in this elite network, where positions in politics, media and consultancies are becoming increasingly interchangeable. This follows the trend of other Nordic countries, where the professionalisation and commercialisation of political communication has already occurred. Interviews with Finnish PR professionals allow us to trace a common culture where professional expertise, fields of connection and norms and values are shared. The analysis is applied to the context of elite theories and major societal changes of recent decades, including the weakening of the Nordic corporatist system, privatisation and the global trends of mediatisation and promotional culture.

KEYWORDS

PR consultants; elite culture; political communication

Recently, several Finnish politicians, officials and political aides have become communication professionals or lobbyists, and a growing number of journalists have moved into the PR business, capitalising on their expertise and established media relationship networks. In neighbouring Sweden, moves between politics, consultancy and the media have been commonplace as part of the 'revolving doors' phenomenon. Swedish researchers Palm and Sandström (2014) describe this as an emergence of a new communication elite, where the boundaries between the three fields of media, politics and PR (public relations) are becoming increasingly porous, as agents migrate from one field to another. Gradually, these agents come to share a common body of professional knowledge, norms and rules. These elites also share values and identities.

The present study tests the idea of an emerging political communication elite in the Finnish context. Professional PR consultants were interviewed to see whether and how this kind of common culture is manifested in the ways they talk about their work. It is challenging to analyse empirically the existence and nature of an elite group, especially since these networks now cross more sector boundaries than ever before, can be unofficial and include people from vertically different positions. Network analysis is one strategy commonly used to address this research area (Carroll et al. 2010; Kenis and Schneider 1991; Ruostetsaari 2015), but if a more culturally oriented lens is desired, we must look beyond the statistics

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and connections on paper to understand how these consultants see their work and role *vis-a-vis* these other, powerful actors in the political field. Here, the scope is limited to PR consultants' interview data, but, to gain a more comprehensive picture, it is recommendable to expand the research to include actors from the fields of media and politics. The aim of the study was to find out *how the Finnish PR consultants see their own role in the present day Finnish polity?*

The empirical data consist of 25 interviews with Finnish communication professionals who have worked in PR and PA (public affairs). Three categories of characteristics were identified using a qualitative content analysis of the consultants' roles and significance in the circle of political communication actors. Consultants' career paths were examined as part of the analysis. Further, the question of societal influence was addressed to determine how the consultants see their power position in the political communication scene.

Political communication elites in the age of professional PR

The theoretical starting points of this article are in elite research and professional and promotional political communication, which has expanded into an industry itself in current Western polities. Combining these viewpoints, the idea is to consider how uniform their ideas, norms, activities and connections are in the field of political communication. To begin, there is a rich research tradition discussing the role of elites in contemporary Western societies. The classical elite theorists Pareto (1935), Mosca (1939) and Mills (1956) referred to a somewhat unanimous power elite formed by representatives of different societal fields with relatively common interests, and the ability to create political unity and solid connections with each other or otherwise close relations. The different societal elites could overlap and unite and form one, concrete elite, even if their power manifestations differ. Even when not referring to a monolithic power elite in the manner of the classical elite theorists, contemporary elite theorists, who do not see democracy and elitism as opposites, often see politics as a rather constrained field. The centre of political power is often seen as comprised of individuals who form their own elite political culture driven by certain beliefs, attitudes, ideas and rules (Dye and Zeigler 1975; Etzioni-Halevy 1993; Stone 1987; Useem 1984; Wiberg 2006).

When defining 'elites', one can see them as those ruling groups who have strategic and central positions in society that regularly enable them to influence significant societal decisions (Dogan and Higley 1998; Ruostetsaari 2003). Palm and Sandström (2014) discuss the idea of a strategic communication elite in Sweden and argue that they represent an inner circle often closely interconnected by different types of bonds, personal and/or professional, forming networks. This generally cohesive elite network shares an 'elite culture of politics' based on common beliefs, attitudes and ideas related to politics (Palm and Sandström 2014; Wiberg 2006, 255–256). The elites' ideas are, then, reflected in how politics is conducted and communicated in the polity: who is involved in the political processes and how, how decisions are made and how politics is communicated to the larger public.

The role of public communication – and that among the elites – has become extremely important in today's political communities. Several political communication researchers have attested to the close relations among media, politics and PR in today's Western societies. Pieczka (2006) talks about an identified circuit of power among these fields; this illustrates the situation of elites working in the same areas knowing and socialising with each other.

What is central to the activities of these circles or elites of political communication is their ability to produce and select, circulate and communicate knowledge, thus promoting certain interests and creating dominant discourses or frames around policy issues (L'Etang 2008; Palm and Sandström 2014). As in any elite network, different parties regularly find themselves in potentially conflicting situations. Interests need to be reconciled continuously, and when this is done successfully, everyone wins, demonstrating the symbiotic side of the functioning of such a circle.

PR consultants' roles mean they have different interest organisations, like private companies, public organisations and some non-governmental organisations as their clients, so they serve as new producers of knowledge and intermediaries establishing connections among interest organisations, the media and political actors. Here, PR work is understood as comprising both PR and PA tasks and seen as a continuum of efforts to influence political processes. Globally, PR activities have expanded from traditional commercial product marketing to political communication and marketing. Recently, these areas have come closer, both in ideas and practice (Louw 2010). Thus, PR is closely connected to political influencing or lobbying, and traditional lobbying channels and connections are being complemented and connected to influencing the public sphere (Allern 2011; Davis 2002; Godwin, Ainsworth, and Godwin 2013; Ihlen and Berntzen 2007).

In Sweden and Norway, the real expansion of the PR industry began in the 1980s (Allern 2011). Finland is a latecomer in the area of large-scale professional PR and PA (Kantola 2016; Kantola and Lounasmeri 2014). The expansion of the Scandinavian PR sector is related to the weakening of democratic forms of corporatism, wherein organised cooperation between the state and interest organisations was traditionally important in many policy areas. Since the 1990s, lobbying has taken a more central role in political decision-making, partly replacing more institutionalised corporatist representation (Allern 2011; Rommetvedt 2005; Tyllström 2013).

As part of this systemic change, consultants' roles have become increasingly important. This prompted Kuusela and Ylönen (2013) to describe the system as changing from a corporatist one to a consultant democracy. In such systems, political decision-making is steered not only by the parliamentary and interest groups' balance of power, but also by politicians' and civil servants' cooperation with consultants. 'Consultant democracy' is a metaphor for practices where power and influence are shifting to the private sector, to actors neither democratically elected nor publicly accountable for their actions. In the Anglo-American context, business-oriented thinking emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, but the Finnish system has taken such steps only recently (Kuusela and Ylönen 2013, 10–11, 24–25). As Finland's lobbying industry strengthens, consultancies with close connections to politics have benefitted the most. Politics becoming an area of private business raises several questions in the context of democracy (see Tyllström (2013) for the Swedish discussion). Since consultants operate under market logic and run businesses where they represent clients who pay for the connections and knowledge they provide, this puts different societal actors in unequal positions to influence politics. Further, as the business is not officially regulated, much of the activity remains outside public view.

Since the 1990s, changes in the Finnish political and economic systems have outpaced those in neighbouring Nordic countries. Finland was, in many respects, a closed economy until the 1980s, when the financial markets and banking sector were gradually deregulated. In 1995, the country joined the European Union; since then, the traditionally

consensus-based, corporatist political and social systems have become more competitive and commercialised (Heiskala 2006; Herkman 2009). Historically, the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent bilateral trade between the countries, dismantling of regulatory systems and the opening of the markets for competition crumbled the base of the 'old' Finnish consensus (Ruostetsaari 2003).

Among societal elites, Finland has traditionally been characterised as having a high level of trust and cooperation (Ruostetsaari 2003; Wiberg 2006). However, several studies have noted that these elites are transforming after the substantial transitions of the 1990s; despite some continuity in their shared goals, their unity is not the same as before (cf., Lounasmeri 2010; Ruostetsaari 2003). In the competition economy, actors' interests are becoming more heterogeneous, and it is more difficult to make decisions concerning direct business interests in 'cabinets' (Heiskala and Luhtakallio 2006; Lounasmeri and Ylä-Anttila 2014; Ruostetsaari 2003). Previously, Finland was often described as a club whose decision-makers across sectors knew each other and where matters could be agreed upon via parliamentary committees, tripartite negotiations or unofficial talks. Traditionally, there were no large obstacles in reaching people – even those in high positions – yet, the old system was closed, and knowing people was important. In recent decades, this rather simple system has become more open, international and competitive. The ties and connections among the media, politicians and private companies are no longer direct, and the corporate sector is not tied into the political system as tightly and directly as before. In many instances, direct communication has been replaced by mediated communication (Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2009; Ruostetsaari 2003; Sipponen 2000).

Changes in Finnish society have coincided with those in other Western democracies marked by the development of growing professionalism in different sectors, competition and increasingly mediated communication. Along with the global spreading of promotional culture, PR has grown into a powerful industry with oligopolistic tendencies (Miller and Dinan 2008). Moreover, the industry is closely connected to centres of political and economic power (Palm and Sandström 2014). In Finland, this has occurred rather recently, and social changes have been rapid. One can argue that the Finnish social system has modernised relatively late and that trust in elite relations has, often, been based on familiarity, small circles of people and the consensual, corporatist system.

Interviewing Finnish PR consultants

For this study, 25 semi-structured interviews of Finnish communication professionals were completed between March 2013 and March 2014.¹ The consultants represent the range of Finnish communication agencies and professionals whose work concentrates on media relations and public affairs. A limited number of Finnish agencies offer political consultancy, or more plainly, lobbying services. Initially, the different rankings and databases of Finnish communication consultancies that offer PR and/or PA services were studied, and the different companies found were investigated to see whether they are actually in the business of providing services in the area of societal and political affairs. As Finland is a small country of 5.5 million inhabitants, also a business branch like this cannot grow into an enormous size. By a reasonable measure, one can claim that all the relevant agencies were detected. Next, the people working in these agencies were identified with a specific stress on those working in the areas of media management/PR and/or PA. Snowball sampling was used as a second

method of collecting and confirming relevant interviewees, as the same names started to be repeated again and again. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

Among Finnish PR consultancies, there are several small, established, traditional companies that have always offered PA services, some that have expanded into the sector and newcomers with PA at the core of their business. At the same time, international chains have appeared on the scene, either buying out Finnish bureaus or establishing close partnerships. The business is in constant flux: agencies are merging or being acquired by larger players. (Kantola and Lounasmeri 2014). In 2015, the five biggest communication agencies in the Finnish market were the Miltton Group, Pohjoisranta Burson-Marsteller, Hill and Knowlton Finland, Cocomms and Ellun Kanat. Recently, Finnish communication agencies have grown their business substantially. Among the 10 largest, 8 increased their sales margin in 2016; this is the best metric to describe the size of the trade in the agencies' business. Their combined sales grew by 13.3%, from 2015, to a total of 37.7 million euros. This growth came, mostly, from Miltton Group and Ellun Kanat, which are among those agencies profiled with consultants coming from the political inner circle. The combined growth of the sales margins of the largest agencies was 4.4 million euros, of which the two agencies accounted for 3.5 million. These firms were also extremely profitable, when measured by return on investment (Haapala 2016).

It is notable that new agencies, like the Miltton Group and Ellun Kanat, have grown and become some of the largest in Finland. They have high profiles because of their staffs' close connections to politics; however, more traditional PA agencies, like the Swedish-American Kreab Gavin Andersson (1988) and Euro Facts (1989), which have long operated in the Finnish market, no longer seem able to compete with these agencies. This sends a strong signal regarding the importance of connections and the ability of these newer agencies to market their services and dominate the field.

In the empirical analysis, the consultants' career developments were assessed, to get a general view of the field and see how they have moved among the sectors of politics, media and consultancy. Respondents were asked to describe their career, to explain and reflect upon their work and the services they offer and to describe their own role and relationships in the political and media fields. Using a qualitative content analysis approach (Mayring 2000), three categories of characteristics were set to analyse consultants' positions in the circle of political communication actors. These included:

- (1) Connections to media and/or political elite circles. These were traced by looking at consultants' career paths and the significance they gave to these connections.
- (2) Common structure of expertise related to the field of political communication.
- (3) Affinity and solidarity with other members of the elite, as expressed by sharing common norms and values.

In addition to these categorisations, the interviews addressed a fourth question, that of influence, by asking how consultants saw the significance of their own work and about their possibilities of influencing public discussion or political processes. The challenges usually related to elite interviewing were acknowledged: elite actors often position themselves as superior to the interviewer and wish to give a positive, non-critical account of their own activities, choosing carefully what to disclose (Conti and O'Neil 2007; Welch et al. 2002). Consequently, the constructivist approach to the interviews and their analyses is stressed

here: the aim was to see how the consultants themselves interpret, construct and legitimise their own role and significance in the political machinery. The researcher's task, then, was to produce a meaningful and credible interpretation of the material in light of theoretical reflections and the data available regarding the Finnish political communication scene. One helpful tool in creating a credible picture was also the data available regarding the agencies, their growth, and the career paths of the consultants.

Analysis: characterising the role and expertise of the consultants

First category: connections and career paths

When examining the Finnish PR consultants' career paths, we find that the picture is not clear-cut, and different strands and histories are visible. For the purpose of analytical clarity, interviewees were first classified into two broad groups: those with a political and administrative background (14) and those with a media and corporate communication background (11). These groups were further classified into four more nuanced groups.

Among the 25 interviewees, those with a background in politics and strong connections to the political machinery and politicians were identified as *political consultants*. These consultants represented two different generations; the younger generation represents the core group that is part of new, rising political communication elite. They have worked in politics either as party officials, aides or as elected politicians. The older group has been in the consultancy business for a long time and established their most important connections early on. To some degree, it seems they are currently being 'left behind', since their political connections are not as current anymore. They are trying to establish new ones by recruiting younger consultants with more up-to-date connections to the ranks of their own agencies. Another important group features consultants with a background in journalism. They are *media consultants*. Their area of expertise is clearly related to media relations and PR dealing with public discussion and media as a channel of influence. The third distinguishable group are those who have worked mostly as consultants and who sometimes have experience from communications work in the corporate sector; they are *pure consultants*. Finally, there is a group somewhat distinguishable from the political consultants, those whose background is mostly in public administration. These are *policy consultants*.

To sum up, consultants can be broadly categorised into two groups, *political* (including political and policy consultants) and *media consultants* (including media and pure consultants). The agencies where these consultants work can be divided into those with PA at their core and direct access to the political system because of personal relationships and those that have entered this space due to the bandwagon effect.

What about the perceived significance of being connected to either the political or media world? The consultants placed a great deal of emphasis on their connections to other members of the elite by describing their nature and significance. Belonging or being part of an elite circle means having a direct connection to prominent political or media figures. These connections are acquired by working in politics or the media. In this circle, consultants assume a mediating role between their clients and the media and political actors. The interviews exposed consultants' differing attitudes towards the importance of personal relationships, or their desire to indicate their importance. The consultants could be distinguished as those who were actually close to political insiders and those further from the core. To an

insider, a younger generation political consultant, the Finnish state machinery appeared 'even shockingly open':

We are a lot more open society than one would sometimes imagine. We are, actually, shockingly open. If you go through a little bit of trouble you can get all the information about [what goes on] in this country from out there. Of course, some details [are] not [available], but that is obviously clear. But you can go quite a long way. (Interviewee 8)

At the other end of the spectrum, those outside the political circle, finding the right information and people about, for example, legislative processes, is more complicated; even more so than at the EU level:

It was, in all honesty, a rather peculiar observation what I did regarding the Finnish [system] ... very little information can be found, in the end. Even though we should have an open and public administration, everything should be easily available and so on, but still, EU sources are much more available. (Interviewee 14, a younger generation policy consultant)

It was clear that personal connections are paramount for succeeding in the job:

Networks are of utmost importance because it makes things a lot easier when you know someone. It is much easier to start talking with them. (Interviewee 13, an older generation political consultant)

If you try to influence the media and decision makers from the unknown, it cannot succeed because the other one is not able to evaluate whether they should listen to you or not. And, of course there is the next level, where there is, to a certain extent, an old-boy network, where having certain relations helps in itself. (Interviewee 3, an older generation pure consultant)

Second category: common structures of expertise

Three specific areas clearly related to a common structure of expertise emerged from the interviews: knowledge of systems and people, producing information and resolving conflict situations. This expertise was primarily related to either political or media systems. The political and media consultants were thus clearly distinguishable when examining the basis of their expertise. All interviewees stressed the relevance and significance of expertise and mentioned its three key areas.

First, *knowledge of systems and people* refers to knowing the processes, either political or journalistic, and how they are managed, who is involved in what way, who has influence over certain things and how decision-making is carried out. A substantial amount of this information is unofficial and can only be learned from within these processes and witnessing things. Consultant 1, an older generation political consultant, describes the consistent construction of expertise:

In our firm, we have built our own network strong, so that we have people with different strengths and backgrounds. You have to be able to function ... by knowing the machinery and the procedures ... so that you will be able to get involved and, so to speak, hand in your lottery coupon.

In the media field, expert consultants know how news is made, what sells, how players in the field operate, the timetables and routines and which journalists concentrate on which themes. Understanding the media's logic and how to cooperate with different elements is pivotal:

We are able to explain to our client how media operates, what is a recommended course of action in a [particular] situation, with whom it is worthwhile to talk, and, when necessary, also have that conversation on behalf of the client. In this firm, we believe – overwhelmingly – that

we master the media logic and the way of thinking in the media. (Interviewee 15, an older generation media consultant)

In the policy-making field, one needs to understand the official and unofficial channels and procedures related to law-making and enhancing certain ideas that might amount to concrete decisions or legislation later on. Here, also knowing who is in charge of certain areas or is interested in certain fields is important, both at the level of political parties and parliamentary groups and the official machinery, the ministries. It is also extremely important to recognise the unofficial channels and connections in the political process:

It is exactly the point of being able to point out certain fellows ... A good example is XX ... her point of view can actually have a surprisingly large effect in a certain matter ... this is the kind of [information] you will not get anywhere, and even in the party they might not recognize it ... It's a kind of implicit knowledge ... once you realize yourself that this is, actually, a very important issue to this person, and she wants to keep it on the agenda ... it means you need to feed it. And produce more information for her ... and show [to your client] ... how to argument in this issue. (Interviewee 25, a younger generation political consultant)

A substantial amount of this information is tacit and can only be accessed from the inside. In addition, part of the expertise is sharing a certain discursive world, an understanding of what politics is, and who needs to be involved when and how ideas are put forward.

Second, *producing and controlling competitive information* has become a key point in both the media and political arenas, as regularly noted in the interviews. The ever-growing flows of information, along with the fragmentation of media and audiences, have created a need for information-packaging. These intermediaries, the consultants, serve politicians and journalists. Consultants describe how they need to nurture relationships and regularly produce relevant material to target those actors they wish to influence:

In the long run, you will have had to build your own *modus operandi* in such a way that it produces interesting issues on a regular basis, and that you have a service-oriented attitude. (Interviewee 6, an older generation media consultant)

Consultants' communication expertise includes adequacy and consistency of communication, which one could also call 'the feed'. This information is used to base political decisions on, or to produce journalistic news. Given the vast amount of information and the short time to acquaint oneself with it, if those lobbying for their interests can produce good material (clearly and simply), decision-makers appreciate it. The same logic holds in the relationships between journalists and sources. The material produced must be up-to-date, credible and fact-based:

You will quite quickly start to appreciate someone who can deliver you comprehensive material ... you make it possible to the minister or parliamentarian to succeed through that material. In the best-case scenario, your firm, or the party you represent, does nothing. What happens (instead) is that the information is so current that the ministry and the minister take it up as their own agenda. (Interviewee 25, a younger generation political consultant)

Third, a consultant's *problem-solving competencies* are an important part of their expertise. A consultant can help in a difficult, or even crisis, situation when communications with stakeholders, the public and/or other elite actors have failed. This is repeatedly described in PR literature (cf., Seiffert, Bentele, and Mende 2011). Consultants frequently describe how they have supported clients in crisis situations:

We might have been able to minimise the damage and consult the client in such a way that they have gotten through the crisis ... we have been able to get messages through in such a

situation and contained the crisis so that it hasn't spread further ... (Interviewee 15, an older generation media consultant)

Third category: sharing common norms and values

Sharing common norms and values with other members of the elite means accepting and adhering to a shared political culture, sharing dominant values on how – and what – to communicate with other parties, how politics as a process works and the roles of the different parties involved. Ideally, these norms and values create solidarity and affinity among the agents in the field. Cook (1998) identifies these kinds of institutional rules and manners in media and politics, describing them as both official and unofficial. Often, they are understood almost as natural, the way things are handled. March and Olsen (2013) describe this as a kind of logic of decency that directs one's behaviour and activity and is commonly complied with, because it is seen as legitimate, even just.

Common norms seen here include the way cooperation is expected to work between the parties who make up the elite circle and the dos and don'ts, all that is considered part of the normal dealings among elites. Interviewees made it obvious that there are certain lines that are not to be crossed, even if everyone knows and accepts that each party is governing their own interests. Most consultants saw it as in their own interest to guard and uphold the good reputation of the trade – everyone would suffer if PR consultancy got a bad name in public or in the eyes of the involved parties. Almost everyone claimed an adherence to a common code of conduct and ethical guidelines, which in Finland's case are not formally regulated. Three distinguishable points emerged specifically and repeatedly in the interviews as the core of common norms and values. The first deals with being open and truthful: being open about who is represented at a given time and what interest they are driving towards anyone the consultant approaches. This does not, however, include being publicly open about clients. The point also involves being truthful about cases or political processes in question. Trust is a guarded commodity that should not be lost, or it will lead to losing business.

A lobbyist can never produce false material. – If you once get caught, goddammit, you do not have a business. Then it is of no use to call anyone –as we have seen, a lobbyist should never drive a politician into a situation where a strong conflict results. (Interviewee 25, a younger generation political consultant)

Trust was repeatedly stressed as a factor that carries and supports elite relationships. Solidarity and affinity are created and upheld by maintaining trusting relations with other elite actors. Almost all consultants emphasised the relevance of trust inside the circle. Trust building could be seen also as instrumental and, as such, a commodity. In business relationships, the strategic game of give and take inevitably emerges. Many political communication researchers describe, for example, the relationship between PR consultants and journalists as a symbiotic yet cannibalistic one, where both parties feed off the other (Louw 2010). Everyone involved is aware of the nature of the 'game' being played:

We converse in a rather friendly way. Always, when I phone, for example, managing editors that I know, I naturally tell them what my agenda is this time around ... When grownups communicate with other grownups, it is usually pretty straightforward. Because if they notice that I have bullshitted them or led them astray, then it will end very quickly. (Interviewee 7, an older generation media consultant)

The second point on common norms and values concerns not seeking open conflict or harming other parties. PR practices are often connected in critical research with certain conflictual elements (Bentele and Seidenglanz 2008; Moloney 2005). These consultants stressed their relationships with key players in media and politics that were, in essence, about enhancing harmony and trust. Putting heavy pressure on another party was considered disrespectful of the rules and results in everyone losing:

... seeking for an open conflict in public ... I do not feel it is very sensible in this kind of activity ... of course, the politicians always suspect you of all possible things, but ... when a minister or a parliamentarian or such can profile her/himself or get points, then the media publicity works, it is a positive situation for everyone. However, if a conflict situation arises, one must be very careful because ... even if the client is a very good one ... they might cause harm to all the parties involved ... to the company in question, to the minister as well as the trustee or lobbyist concerned. (Interviewee 25, a younger generation political consultant)

Thirdly, there was wide agreement on the role of publicity and the media in the political process: what is discussed in public and at which stage of a process, or who can give statements about certain issues. It was attested to as a common aspect of the Finnish system that consultants not have a high public profile: they should not seek wide public attention as a consultant, nor appear in public for their client. There was also a common understanding that delicate issues should not be made public, but instead handled in private negotiations.

As it became apparent, however, these rules are, occasionally, broken. This typically occurs in situations involving larger conflicts of interest, and is caused by or results from a breach of trust. Consultants frequently cited examples, indicating that this is not considered 'business as usual'. One particular point where some, mostly old-school consultants, did not agree with newcomers was going public themselves. Consultants and lobbyists' public visibility is a fairly new phenomenon in Finland, and some consultants shun it, seeing it as harming the credibility of their work. However, even if the consultants feel competitive towards each other, they still defend the legitimacy of their trade, so any criticising of the neighbours was done cautiously.

The question of influencing political processes

Finally, there is the question of consultants' influence, seen from their own perspective. Having real power to affect political processes and outcomes on a regular basis, and the general social climate, are signs of influence. This also entails having the ability to set the agenda for political discussions; influencing the evolving discourse on how issues are discussed, both publicly and in elite circles; and being able to quiet undesirable issues. This can be analysed on at least two levels: how consultants describe their work and accomplishments, and how they see their influence on a general level.

The interviewees legitimised their positions by underlining their expertise and the lawful business aspect of their work: they are like lawyers offering fair trials for 'everyone':

Everyone has a right to get their voice heard ... a right to a fair communicative defence. (Interviewee 7, an older generation media consultant)

When asked about their position and potential to influence matters, they described themselves as mostly servants and interest-free providers of information. The consultants clearly detached themselves from political affiliations: they expressed wanting to build bridges and

presented themselves as neutral, non-political professionals. As they fled political ideologies, their common values became market and business logic.

What separates us from an agency giving legal advice in business, or what separates us from an investment bank[?] The assignments are surprisingly often very similar. (Interviewee 8, a younger generation political consultant)

Typically, consultants denied having significant power or influence and seemed to act as mere technicians in the process. Oftentimes, when asked about influencing media discourse, they shunned using terms like ‘media management’ or ‘control’.

When asked about the ethical side of PR and whether it should be regulated, many consultants still see Finland as a special case. Despite opening to the world and common operating logic, Finland remains small and provincial, homely, with no need for US- or EU-style regulations. Others see Finland becoming a part of the global system, so the same rules apply. They also saw regulation as a means of legitimising the business and maintaining a good reputation.

Conclusions

The commercial growth and professionalisation of PR consultancies sector represents one manifestation of the changes that have occurred in the Finnish move from a corporatist system towards a consultant democracy in recent decades. This article examined the idea of a new, strategic communication elite with a strong influence on policy processes and the public political discourse in a Finnish context. For this purpose, 25 Finnish PR consultants were interviewed, in hopes of constructing a picture of their role in the context of a political communication elite.

Three categorisations trace this elite culture:

- Connections to media and/or political elite circles, by examining the consultants’ career paths and the significance they gave to their professional connections;
- Common structures of expertise related to political communication; and
- Affinity and solidarity with other members of the political communication elite, expressed via common norms and values.

Consultants were deemed either *political* or *media consultants* and then separated with respect to their connections and expertise. In the light of their connections to the political machinery and the way they describe their activities, the political consultants can be estimated as more influential than media consultants. Many consultants actually stressed that the media’s role in political decision-making is not always necessarily significant; this same point appears in the literature (c.f., Kunelius, Noppari, and Reunanen 2009). In analysing European political communication cultures, Pfetsch (2014) has also concluded that Finland traditionally represents a country with a strong reliance on backstage agenda-setting strategies.

On the other hand, the interviews showed that consultants share expertise related to media and political systems, norms and values, regardless of their specific backgrounds. In the larger picture, all consultants serve as mediators among elites, and as such participate in constructing the political agenda and discourse. As such they do form an elite group with a certain culture, but not a very coherent one. Some are closely connected to the political

elite, but others are in an 'outer' ring. Only a small core of the consultants is actually so well connected and in such a position, *vis-à-vis* the insiders of the political system, to give rise to calling them a political communication elite. This small core consists of younger generation, political consultants, who have direct access to the political machinery. As is often the case with elites, there is a core and others, who are located more in the periphery. Etzioni-Halevy (1993) would call them sub-elite(s).

For further research or a more subtle and in-depth analysis of this new layer in the Finnish elite system, interviewing other parties, members of the political and media elite, is recommended. Researching specific cases, media and archival material related to them could also produce meaningful results. These qualitative approaches would be strengthened considerably by network analyses.

All in all, one can conclude that privatisation and marketisation have brought about a growth in the consultancy business related to politics, and along with it, a new emerging logic to democratic decision-making processes. Even if a new generation of consultants and new consultancies are emerging, the inner circles surrounding political communication have not necessarily grown, and the role of tight, trustworthy networks is still important. Currently the situation can be described as a mixture of influences. In the Swedish context, Tyllström (2013) has described the rise of the PR industry as commodification of politics, where PR consultancy seems to have gotten stuck between the sphere of saleable and unsaleable things. In Norway, personal networks of the consultants have proven valuable commodities, as members of the Norwegian Communication Association (NCA) were asked for the single most important factor of success in their profession (Ihlen and Rakkenes 2009). They ranked personal characteristics above strategic knowledge (Kommunikasjonsforeningen 2006). In both Norway and Sweden, the growth of PR consultancy business occurred already earlier than in Finland. Public debate on the agencies' influence on democracy started in the 1990s, continuing in the 2000s around the ethics of the trade (Ihlen and Rakkenes 2009). In Finland, this debate on the role of PR consultants in politics has given rise to public discussion only recently.

At its core, research on elites is always a question of exercising power and its possible abuse. A big question related to this is regulating the PR consultancy business. To date, there is no legislation regulating lobbying in Finland, but only self-regulatory bodies are in place.² Lobbying professionals working in different associations and private companies established the Lobbying Forum in 2010 to discuss ethical guidelines for lobbying, and published the 'House rules for lobbying' in 2012. In 2015, The Finnish Association of Communication Professionals Procom and The Union of Communication professionals Viesti founded The Council of Ethics for Communication. It proclaims to 'address ethical issues, act in an advisory capacity to its constituent organizations and promote good practices in professional communication'. Finnish professionals also claim to adhere to the international ethical codes in the field. In recent years, however, the regulation of lobbying has been heavily discussed in Finland. An initiative for legislation has been in the workings in the Ministry of Justice for several years, and the Lobbying Forum is involved in this process.

The Finnish consultants have mixed attitudes towards the regulation of lobbying; some see Finland as a special case, while others acknowledge the need to maintain the trade's legitimacy. It is of special interest that consultants do not recognise, or want to recognise, their significant influence on the political process, or the problem of business logic entering

the democratic process. Whether this is a typical trait of consultancy, or a feature of Finnish political culture, remains to be discussed.

Notes

1. The interviews were carried out in connection with the research projects *Media Strategies: Elites, lobbyists and journalism* (2013–14, researchers Anu Kantola and Lotta Lounasmeri) and *Strategic Communication Practices in Finnish Political Culture* (2014–5, researcher Lotta Lounasmeri), funded by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation and the Finnish Cultural Foundation. Part of the first round of interviews were conducted by the author alone (9), part together with Anu Kantola (6, in one of the interviews two consultants were interviewed together); the second round (9 interviews) was completed by Master's students as part of their methodology course in Media and Communication at the University of Helsinki's Department of Social Research. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were conducted at the consultants' offices. Interview questions and themes and the art of conducting elite interviews were discussed and developed in depth by the author with the students. All interviews were recorded, and then transcribed by professionals, word for word and maintaining all colloquial expressions. The transcribed interviews varied between 4000 and 15,000 words.
2. Selling influence is punishable in the Finnish criminal code.

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